

'SIT DOWN GIRLIE'

Legal issues from a feminist perspective



New territory

Girlie is pleased to announce the creation of a Project called the Indigenous Women's Legal Outreach Project within the Top End Women's Legal Service (TEWLS) in the Northern Territory.

The project came about because of a meeting of Indigenous Women in 1985. This meeting was held at the North Australian Aboriginal Legal Aid Service (NAALAS) to address a growing awareness of the legal needs of women and the ways in which those needs were often not met by existing legal services. In 1996 TEWLS was established to provide legal services to women in remote communities. As a result of this work, TEWLS applied to ATSIC for a grant, through NAALAS, to fund the Indigenous Women's Legal Outreach Project.

The application was successful. The Project consists of a Darwin-based Community Development Worker and provides for two Indigenous women to be appointed as Community Legal Workers in four communities. The communities are Jabiru, Kunbarlangjanaja, Angurugu and Umbakumba.

The Community Legal Workers provide a link between the women in their community and service providers such as police, clinics and TEWLS. They may act as interpreters, support workers and information providers.

Bits from overseas

- *Girlie* is thrilled to announce that Iranian women are sensing real po-

litical progress, after doing extremely well in recent local elections. Seen by many as a 'Teheran Spring', women took a majority of seats in 20 cities and swept the board on four town councils. Predictions are that women will hold almost half the seats in the country once all the votes are counted!

- A UN investigation by its Human Rights Commission has confirmed that the Indonesian military have been using rape and violence against women as a form of intimidation and torture in East Timor and other parts of Indonesia, including Jakarta during last May's riots. Some Ethnic Chinese women were raped and then sent pictures of their rape accompanied by threats that the pictures would be widely distributed if they spoke up. Women's rights groups documented 168 rapes during the unrest, while figures are understood to be much larger in East Timor.
- Women in Alabama have recently been devastated by a new State law which prohibits the sale of vibrators and other sexually explicit appliances. Those who flout this law face a year in jail and a \$10,000 fine. Challenged as unconstitutional, under the American Constitution's guarantee to the right to 'the pursuit of happiness', a federal judge has to decide whether this right includes the pursuit of an orgasm: a tough decision in a state which also prohibits oral sex between married, consenting heterosexual adults.

Too little too late

Justice Vincent Bruce has resigned after finally delivering his decision in what has come to be known as 'the IUD case', Australia's longest running product liability case. Despite what the applicants claim was overwhelming evidence, Justice Bruce ruled against the nine women (representing 290 similar claimants) seeking damages from Nutrasweet (formerly Searle), alleging that its IUD, the 'Copper 7', had rendered them infertile. It is an extremely disappointing end to an outrageously

long wait for the applicants, who will now seek to appeal his decision. *Girlie* feels it is an additional shame that the case was overshadowed by the controversy surrounding Justice Bruce, and now his resignation.

More women judges

Bravo to Australian Women Lawyers, who have written to the federal Attorney-General calling for more women to be appointed to the bench. The submission noted that there are no women Supreme Court judges in Tasmania and the ACT, that there are only four women out of 42 Federal Court judges; and the general scarcity of women judges within other jurisdictions. Victorian Attorney-General, Jan Wade, has supported the call and suggested that the solution may lie in the appointment of more women as Attorneys General, noting that she has appointed nine women to the bench since the Coalition came to power in 1992.

While *Girlie* applauds all of the above, she notes that women in the profession have been calling for this for quite some time but also that the appointment of women to powerful positions within the law does not necessarily mean the redress of gender imbalance in decisions. *Girlie* doesn't know how popular a call for the appointment of more *feminists* to the bench would be.

Belle Igerent

Belle is a Feminist Lawyer.